

## COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND SEMIOTIC METHODS APPLICATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*This research consists of two parts. The first part examines mainstream communication studies as a discipline which emerged from other social sciences like, psychology, sociology, and anthropology with historical roots in Greek and Roman oratory and rhetoric. In the analysis of texts in communication studies, critical methods such as discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and the semiotic approach are often employed. These methods add to critical and scientific depth as well as provide students and scholars the techniques for understanding and explaining how communication texts are designed to influence audiences. Mainstream Communication Studies is definitive, descriptive and explanatory in nature; the critical approaches are analytic, argumentative, comparative and evaluative. The second part of this research focuses on semiotic methods used in the analysis of texts. Through a semiotic analysis of Intel's Sprinter Ad of 2007, different levels of meaning are revealed. These meanings help to explain the reasons for the immense public criticism and the eventual withdrawal of this advert from the media in the US.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Communication Studies, Critical Approaches & Semiotic Methods*

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### INTRODUCTION

From the earliest beginnings of humanity, communication has always been an integral part of life. Whether through specific sounds or by spoken or written words; humans naturally from birth begin to devise ways of conveying their needs, fears, and emotions to one another. Some scientists even argue that the process of communication begins before birth as some mothers communicate with their unborn babies (Gunes and Gunes:2012). Communication involves the conveying or transmission of ideas or information between persons, groups of persons or between large and scattered heterogeneous people. However, the number of persons involved, as well as the kinds of instrument used to facilitate the communication process, determines the classification of the process as interpersonal or mass communication.

It is known that sending and receiving of messages contribute to the process of communication. A sender of the message should be able to translate the thoughts which can be easily interpreted by the receiver and the receiver should also be able to send feedback to the sender.

Communication is best appreciated from the point of view of functional analysis. The functional analysis examines communication from its function in society (Dominick:2013). Communication functions as a tool for self-expression and the development of self-identity in society. Through communication, people express their physical, psychological and emotional needs (Steinberg:2007). Communication also serves as a tool for persuasion; helping to influence attitudes and causing positive and sometimes, negative behavioral change. Communication is also a tool for educational, information and cultural exchange and linkage between people as it

helps to facilitate the establishment and sustenance of interpersonal and inter-communal relationships.

The increasingly complex nature of the world as a result of rising populations, socio-economic and socio-political change as well as developments in science and technology, has resulted in new challenges for communication. Mass communication which was established to inform, educate and entertain mass audiences around the world through the various traditional mass media is increasingly proving insufficient for today's contemporary world. New communication technologies especially social networks have resulted in new and diverse methods of communication exchange. The traditionally important role of the gatekeepers is becoming more and more reduced as the internet allows for greater freedom and access to information which can be sent or received. However, the accessibility of internet sites has its attendant positive and negative consequences. For example; due to the minimal or total absence of gatekeepers on the internet, rumors, conspiracy theories, vitriol and tasteless content continually abound (Dominick: 2013).

Communication has far developed beyond the traditional sending and receiving of messages. Communication is increasingly becoming the backbone of today's globalizing world as it is the medium for technological, economic and political exchange between persons organizations and governments. The important role communication plays in contemporary life informs the need for it to be carefully studied and understood. The increasingly complex interrelationships amongst those who communicate and the emergence of varied forms of new media informs the need for a specialized discipline with a wide scope which covers past, current and future theories and methods in communication.

## **COMMUNICATION STUDIES**

### **Mainstream Communication Studies**

Communication studies is an academic discipline which studies the processes of human communication. Communication Studies examines and interprets issues in interpersonal, mass communication and current new digital media communication. Communication studies integrate aspects of the social sciences and the humanities as its scope encompasses disciplines such as: psychology, philosophy, linguistics and cultural studies (Beck, Bennett and Wall:2001). Communication studies also examine how messages are interpreted from political, cultural, economic and semiotic perspective. The flexibility of Communication studies as a result of its wide scope gives its graduates the advantage of being able to take several career paths. Graduates of Communication studies can work as university professors, marketing researchers, journalists, media editors, advertisers, public relations managers, designers, actors, media consultants, amongst several other professions.

The historical roots of Communication studies are traced back to ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric, oratory, and persuasion which developed under philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Cicero. It then developed through the Middle Ages and Renaissance as rhetoric and logic till the early twentieth century when it began to be studied as a discipline. Communication studies were drawn from psychology, sociology, and anthropology but with a focus on trying to understand human behavior in the creating, understanding and interpreting of messages.

Early twentieth-century American scholars such as Charles Horton Cooley; Walter Lippmann and John Dewey laid the foundations for the development of communication as an academic field. Simonson (2012) argues that Charles Horton Cooley more than any of the early scholars deserves the title of the father of Communication studies. Simonson states that Cooley provided an expansive vision for communication study that blended normatively grounded political economy, interpretive sociology, social psychology, and cultural criticism into a larger project committed to democracy as

a way of life. His was also the first to extend the American social theory of communication, which he took to be constitutive of selves, moral communities, and society at large (1).

Research in communication continued through the post-World War I years and intensified during the post-World War II years in the United States, Pooley (2008) notes that during these years communication lacked legitimacy as a discipline; what he calls 'legitimacy deficit' (44). Through extensive research work by scholars such as Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell and Wilbur Schramm at the Universities of Columbia, Chicago, and Illinois as well as funding by the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950's; communication developed into a full academic discipline to be taught as a university course. Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* (1956) which examined media effects was most influential at the time. The book inspired the Hypodermic or Magic bullet communication theory.

Through the 1950's and 1960's Communication studies as an academic discipline continued to develop through the work scholars of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania; this helped to spark off interest in communication studies in Germany at the University of Hamburg. During these years; scholars such as Harold Innis, Marshal Mc Luhan, Claude Shanon, Warren Weaver and George Gebner either postulated theories, established models or published books on communication which helped to explain the communication process and the role of the media in everyday life. By the 1970s Communication Studies had matured as an academic discipline to be offered at Bachelor's degree level through to doctoral level at the universities in the US and in Europe.

Courses in Communication Studies often cover 9 core areas of : technology, critical-cultural, health, intercultural, interpersonal, mass communication, organizational, political and environmental communication. Other programmes and courses like journalism, public relations, advertising, theatre, film production, and criticism are often included in the curriculum.

### **Criticism in Communication Studies**

Criticism, to simply put, is a process which aims to find the merits or faults in a person, group, organization, or in an artistic or scientific work. Criticism is often misunderstood as being a negative exercise aimed at discrediting or condemning people or their works. There is no denying the fact that there exist lousy and destructive forms of criticism yet there is constructive criticism (Walters:2001). Constructive criticism is aimed at sharpening human behavior and inspiring producers of artistic and scientific works to attain the highest levels of productivity.

From an academic perspective, criticism can be viewed as the careful study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature, artwork, film or social trends. Criticism examines the two sides of an issue, first trying to find reason and meaning then goes on to explain these findings to the audience. Criticism has been widely used in different professions over the years. Each profession has through the years, developed specialized methods of assessing and appraising the performance of its professionals; these methods of assessment and appraisal are termed criticism (Orlik:2009). In communication and media, criticism can be seen as response or feedback to media publications or productions. Walters views this kind of constructive criticism as 'an art, the most refined and effective form of feedback'(1). Criticism in Communication Studies helps writers and producers to know that their works have gained public attention. It also helps them to examine how their works have been received or understood by the audience.

The increasingly complex nature of communication in the globalizing world (a result of the immense popularity of the mass media and new media technologies) continually create problems and raises new issues for debate in society.

The media has become so powerful and perverse that its place and influence in contemporary society can no longer be ignored. Many people rely solely on the media as a resource for news and information. Information obtained is usually taken wholesale with no background findings (Orlik:7). The media is also increasingly impacting on younger audiences as children and teens are increasingly spending time on television, the internet and games. Numerous researches have revealed the negative effects of these media on children. The immense accessibility of the internet particularly puts young users at risk.

The increasingly problems and issues created by the media inform the need for scholarship to help sensitize the public on the merits and demerits of different media and their products. Criticism in communication and media is needed to evaluate and explain media products as many people lack media literacy and so are not able to fully understand the underlying meanings or significance of media products or events (Steinberg:2007). Criticism in communication involves the use of several approaches or methods to contextualize and analyze media works as well as the communication processes.

### **Critical Approaches in Communication Studies**

Several approaches or methods of criticism are often applied by communication and media scholars. Most of the methods used are interdisciplinary in nature as they are also applicable to other disciplines such as: linguistics, literature, psychology, sociology and political science. These methods include:

#### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is the analysis of the language in use in a particular text (Brown and Yule:1983). The text for analysis could either be a piece of writing, a conversation or a communicative event. Discourse analysis examines a text from linguistic and functional perspectives. From the linguistic perspective, discourse analysis considers the choice of words, phrases, sentences, punctuation marks, font sizes, accent, stress and even pagination used in a piece of communication. From the functional perspective, attention is directed at studying how the use of the above mentioned linguistic devices, help to convey meaning to the audience. For example in advertising messages, different font sizes and colors are used to draw the audience's attention. For example in the message below:

Your turnover each year will grow, grow and grow!

The repetition of the word 'grow' as well as the increasing font size, are all used to create emphasis and create visual images of growth in the minds of the audience. Punctuation marks and stresses whether used in written or spoken speech can also be used to convey a variety of meaning. Take for example these two sentences below:

- a) The bleeding child staggered, fell and died.
- b) The bleeding child staggered...fell...and...died.

Sentence (a) is just an ordinary declarative sentence reporting what happened to a bleeding child. The report is very undetached and straightforward. Sentence (b) is however very dramatic and invoking. The use of ellipses adds life and sympathy to the report; the feeling of the audience is thus captured by sentence (b). The main purpose of discourse analysis is to interpret texts through the examination of the use of language.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis was developed in the 1970s by the School of Linguists at the University of Lancaster. Norman Fairclough is the most prominent figure in this field. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the analysis of dialectical relationships between discourse (language and visual images) and other elements of social practices (Fairclough:2001). CDA vigorously seeks to find out what is meant when language is used to describe and explain any phenomena (Fairclough:2003). To the critical discourse analyst, texts are not passive, they are shaped and informed by wider processes in society and should thus be interpreted in their society's context.

CDA seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in power relations by examining the positioning and elements which signify power relations in texts (Hanks: 1986). CDA examines communication texts at three levels; the micro, meso and macro levels. The micro level examines the use of syntax, metaphorical devices and rhetorical devices in the text. The meso level examines production and consumption as well as how power relations are enacted in the text. The macro level is concerned with inter-textual understanding; how current issues in society affect the text being studied. CDA asks questions such as: how is the text positioned or positioning? Whose interests are served by this positioning? What are the consequences of this positioning? For example, the news stories on the front cover of newspapers are deliberately positioned to reflect their importance and also to capture the audience's attention.

### The Semiotic Approach

The semiotic approach examines a communication text from the point of view of semiotics. Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs and the way they work (Fiske:1990). Semiotics was developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). To the semiotician (one who practices semiotic analysis) a sign refers to something other than itself; it depends upon recognition by its users that it is a sign. A sign is something which stands to somebody for something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity (Fiske, p.42). A shirt, dress, haircut, television image or anything at all can be taken as a sign to be decoded and analyzed to discover meaning (Maasik and Solomon: 1994). Semiotics also studied human activities especially cultural events to discover their underlying meanings. For semioticians, every cultural activity leaves a trace of meaning.

According to Roland Barthes, he argued that all behavior is political and represents some personal or group interest. Such interests are encoded in our worldviews or ideologies (Maasik and Solomon, p.1). In the semiotic approach, all signs are regarded as concealing some hidden political or commercial interest and the proliferation of signs in the current age of new media technologies calls for more interest in semiotics.

Fiske (1990) declared semiotics analysis often covers three main areas; a) The study of the sign or signs (icons, indexes or symbols) and the various ways they convey meaning, b) The codes (paradigms and syntagms) in to which signs are organized, c) The culture within which these signs and codes operate (p.40)

Although some scholars argue that semiotics can be combined with an empirical method like content analysis; semiotics is predominantly qualitative in nature with a focus on finding meanings in texts. The denotative and connotative meanings of texts are both studied by semiotics but more attention is focused on the connotative meaning. Connotative meanings are associative as they are related to the interpreter's gender, age, race, social class etc. Studying connotative meanings reveal the underlying socio-political messages contained in a communication text.

### **Differentiating Mainstream Communication and Critical Approaches**

Mainstream Communication Studies refers to communication as a discipline in the social sciences. It is an embodiment of all subject areas and issues covered in the communication curriculum. Communication Studies is basically descriptive and explanatory in nature. Different topics and socio-political issues are introduced, defined, described, and explained in simple terms for easy understanding. The focus is usually on the denotative meanings of words and communication terminologies.

The critical approaches are techniques or methods drawn from other disciplines such as; linguistics, sociology, and psychology. These methods are applied to help sharpen the study of communication studies. The evaluative and analytic nature of the critical approaches gives communication studies critical and scientific depth. The critical approaches also help to develop and sustain the culture of media literacy. Media literacy helps students to learn the critical use of the media. Through the use of the critical approaches, students developed their critical thinking skills and understand how media works are designed to influence audiences (Shibata; 2002). The critical approaches help students also to look beyond the surface and rather examine underlying political and socio-economic and cultural themes found in communication texts.

### **Semiotics Key Concepts**

Semiotics is concerned with finding the underlying meanings in a text or communication event. Meaning is derived after a careful study of signs used in a text. Signs refer to the various components which make up the text; people, the setting, fashion, the actions, the colors, body text etc. Charles Sanders Pierce (the father of American of semiotics), divided signs in to three types; icon, index, and symbol (Fiske, p. 47). An icon bears a direct resemblance to its object. For example, a photograph is an icon of a person and a map is an icon of a country. An index is a sign that is a direct manifestation of the object. Smoke is an index of fire. Symbols are signs which have no relationship with the object; they are arbitrary. The connection between the symbol and the object is a matter of agreement or convention.

According to Saussure, signs are composed of a signifier and signified (Fiske, p.44). The signifier refers to the sign's physical appearance and the signified is the mental concept to which it refers. The signifier and signified are combined to give meaning or signification to phenomena. Signs are organized into systems of codes. Codes are governed by socio-cultural conventions shared by members of a community and they also perform communicative and social functions as reflected in their various classifications.

Codes can be digital or analogue, presentational or representational (Fiske, p:65-66). A digital code is one whose signifiers and signified are clearly separated. Digital codes are easy to understand and notate for example the time readings on a digital watch which give the precise time and not approximations. Analogue codes are continuous in nature and difficult to notate; techniques of digital codes have to be imposed to try to notate them. Music and dance are examples of analogue codes. Presentational codes are indexical, representing only themselves and their encoder. Representational codes are symbolic, standing for other things apart from themselves and the encoder.

### **Semiotic Methods and their Applications**

In semiotics, a variety of methods are used to analyse communication texts. The first one is a) The syntagmatic method which examines the significance of the syntagms used in a text. Syntagms are units taken out of a paradigm. A paradigm is a set from which a choice is made. Numbers and alphabets are examples of paradigms. The second one is

b)The Paradigmatic Method which analysis the positive and negative connotations revealed through the use of the absence of each signifier. The focus is usually on why a particular signifier was used in place of a more workable alternative signifier. A third one is c)The Communication Test that first identifies the distinctive features within a paradigm or syntagm. Secondly, it examines the significance of these differences (Fiske, p:109). The communication test is applicable in both syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis. In the paradigmatic analysis, the processes of substitution or transposition of signifiers are used. In a syntagmatic analysis, addition or deletion is used to transform the text (Newcomb, 1952).



Source: <http://www.hemmy.net/2007/08/04/intel-offensive-and-controversial-sprinter-ad/>

**Figure 1: The Intel ‘Sprinter Ad’**

### A Semiotic Analysis of the Intel Sprinter Ad

The Intel sprinter advertisement which appeared in 2007 created so much public uproar in the US that it had to be quickly removed from the media. Intel through its vice president and director of integrated marketing, Nancy Bhagat had to formally apologize for its mistakes which drew so much public criticism of the company’s advertising methods. A semiotic analysis of this advert reveals the reasons for the public’s criticism.

### Syntagmatic Analysis of the Advertisement

From observation at the denotative level, several signifiers have been used in the advertisement. The advertisement is set in an office as evidence from the plain and typical office-like furnishings. The large glass windows with no homely curtains or blinds and the partitioned rows of desks placed in opposite directions are all suggestive of this. There is a man standing at the center. He is formally dressed. His arms are folded. He is smiling and has a relaxed air of self-confidence. There are also six other persons in the picture. They are all male. The other six males are athletes as reflected in their strong physique, sportswear, and posture. Their posture signifies that they are all sprinters in the set position to run off.

From the caption- Multiply Computing Performance and Maximize The Power of Your Employees as well as from the body text of the advertisement, we can try to decode the meaning intended by the advertiser. The man standing represents an employer while the six athletes are metaphors of the power and speed of the product being advertised- the new Intel Core 2 computer processor.

### Paradigmatic Analysis of the Advertisement

The signifiers used in the advertisement carry a lot of connotations. These connotations stem from the socio-political and socio-cultural inequalities such as the US, a new set of meanings can be read to the advertisement.

The man standing is white and the six sprinters are all black. The sprinters are all in a position which makes them appear to bow to the man standing. The man standing could be taken to be a representation of the stereotype white boss who loves to lord over blacks as his smile, folded arms and relaxed pose all suggest. The stereotype role of the African American as a slave or worker of the white Americans is also reflected. The sprinters are also strong and very athletic looking- a reflection that African Americans are only good at sports or serving white bosses in offices. The paradigmatic opposition created by signifiers in the picture can be tabularized as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1 reveals the contrasting features of the two main signifiers. These differences give the picture a totally different meaning from the meaning intended by the advertiser. The advertisement is now portrayed as a reflection and glorification of racism and stereotyping in the American society – a huge insult to the African American community.

**Table 1: Table Showing Paradigmatic Differences between the Main Signifiers**

	<b>Man Standing</b>	<b>Six Sprinters</b>
Race	White, Caucasian	Black, African
Role	Boss, Employer	Sprinters, Employees
Countenance	Relaxed, confident, smiling, accomplished	Tensed up, unsure of the end
Appearance	Neat and formal	Sportswear and sweaty
Posture	Standing	Couched, head bowed

### SUMMARY

The study of semiotics enhanced the understanding of the underlying meanings in communication messages through the analysis of signs or signifiers used whether in their iconic, indexical or symbolic forms. Signs are not private; they are full of meanings. Meanings are influenced by the socio-cultural and socio-political ideologies of the audience. In a contemporary and increasingly socio-political conscious world, audiences tend to be very conscious of socio-political elements signified by the signifiers used in various texts.

Texts also are not independent. After all, all texts are composed to achieve set goals; educational, informational, commercial etc. All texts have some underlying bias or hidden interest (Maasik and Solomon, 1994,p:4). The underlying interests are often political. Whether consciously or unconsciously all messages are political in nature, in the sense that they protect a particular group's interest (4). This informs Barthes description of politics as a clash of ideologies that takes place in a complex society where the interests of all those who belong to it are continually in competition with one another (5). The US is a typical example of such a complex society. With a history of slavery, prejudice against colored people and a capitalist economy, contemporary society in the US is composed of people of different races and socio-economic status. Each community of people (Native American, blacks, Hispanics, etc.) is in constant struggle for political and economic interests. Each community seeks to defend the interests of its members and fights against any form of marginalization. The sharp criticism of the Intel Ad which was considered a huge insult to the African American community is a reflection of this fact.



As contemporary audiences become more informed and critically minded, writers and producers of communication messages need to be more cautious of the connotations which could be read from their messages. Public messages need to be composed of racial, gender and political consciousness. The signs to be used should never be taken for granted as they can communicate several meanings to the readers. These meanings could make or mar the message. It would be wrong to just assume that the audience will understand an intended meaning or take a message at its surface value. The messages are intended for public consumption so the feelings of the audience towards a message should be a major consideration. Ignorance of the semiotic implications of signifiers in a text results in different interpretations from the audience and could lead to disastrous consequences.

## CONCLUSIONS

Human communication is very complex. Continuous change and development in the fields of science, technology, media, marketing, politics, etc. Result in new issues accompanied by attendant problems which all have to be understood and deliberated upon. It is the role of communication to serve as a medium for the exchange of new ideas brought by these changes and developments. As a discipline, Communication Studies creates awareness, defines, describes and explains these new public issues. The critical approaches serve as methods for analyzing and evaluating current topical issues addressed in Communication Studies. Semiotics and its methods of analysis are invaluable tools in the criticism of communication texts. In a globalizing world where the meanings of signs are in a constant flux, the role of semiotics becomes even more important. Producers of public messages more than ever need to become more conscious of semiotic connotations as informed by socio-cultural and socio-political experiences from the environment.

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